Alvaro del Amo. *Contagio.* Barcelona, Anagrama, 1991, 103 pp.

Some memorable novels —such as Thornton Wilder's classic *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and Alfonso Zapater's *El accidente* (1982)— open with a tragic accident that kills several of the protagonists and then explore the victims' personalities and lives in depth. *Contagio's* first sentence announces the car-crash and disfiguration of the beautiful, young, promising soprano Adelina G. and of an unknown male companion. Her stunned husband, Manuel C., a wealthy fabric seller, decides to investigate; he offers a reward for information and is visited by a stranger. Del Amo's goal, however, is not a psychological probe but a compact expression of the fatal-attraction «contagion» of desires and intertwined lives, and the hex one's family past can work upon the present, all of it governed by fate and change in an unspecified South American environment, and most of it narrated from the different perspectives of the main players, so that «the truth» is constantly shifting. The book jacket even mentions «decalcomanias» to stress the fluid imposition of one life or phase of life upon another.

In Chapter 1 third-person omniscient narration presents the initial situation as it registers on Manuel, who recalls with confusion Adelina's recent life style of scarcely-veiled adulteries, her vague Gran Chaco origins and voice training in Italy, her work as a theater usher and sympathy with a mysterious revolutionary coup. Chapter 2 switches to first-person, as Adelina tells her own story: how she and her brother were orphaned by the early death of their loving, nomadic parents whose legacy was of unflinching hope, family unity and failure; the tender idyll of life with her brother in the capital city, and the pain of receiving in Italy his letter announcing his marriage and suggesting they go their separate ways; her return to the capital just after his sudden flight from it, and her search for him. Chapter 3, narrated in the first person by Adelina's unnamed brother, recounts the destruction of his blissful family life and prosperous business: the revolutionary activities of his father-in-law, José, revived his wife Paula's traumatic childhood memories and drove her toward madness, forcing them to leave the city. Chapter 4 switches in mid-stream from third-person omniscient narration about Manuel's emotionally frigid, fearful childhood with his wealthy but elderly parents and his orphaning at age seven, to Manuel's own first-person account

of his lonely and frustrating bachelorhood, his first love (whom he foolishly ceded to another man), and his sudden great passion for Adelina, who married him on the condition that he ask nothing about her previous life. His narration, and the novel, conclude by returning to and now explaining the situation at the end of Chapter 1. The stranger is Adelina's beloved brother. In two major new twists, he reveals having known «an intimate communion» with his sister, and he has brought a notebook containing her autobiography. He reports that Adelina by chance met José in the theater; together they set out for a joyous reunion, José with Paula and Adelina with her brother, but their car plunged into a river gorge on the very night that Paula died from madness. The brother, ruined by the costs of Paula's illness, has come for the reward and to meet Manuel —the relative he never knew of and who never knew of him.

The multifaceted Alvaro del Amo (b. Madrid, 1942) is a critic, scriptwriter, film and theater director, cultural reporter for television, adapter of the *Oresteia,* playwright, and author of two previous novels, *Mutis* (1980) and *Libreto* (1991). Has he perhaps spread himself too thin to become a skillful novelist? Rarely has a book-jacket promotion seemed so full of misgivings about the author's past novels, and of hopes for the present one. We are told of its «implacable logic of chance» and «diaphanous» plot, that its evident joy in narrating will prove contagious, etc. Unfortunately, this plot never really gets rolling, due to too much change and too little psychological substance and verisimilitude. A promising protagonist through Chapter 2, Adelina simply ceases to matter, or dissolves. Huge, sudden shifts in station are too unbelievable. It is as if the siblings, despite all their hard work, accomplishment and awareness of their parents' excessive idealism, *must* have an adverse fate. Traditional narrative elements or forms rich in potential —the enigmatic origins of a protagonist, the inescapable tragic destiny of a good family, the revolutionary conspiracy, Biblical-type torrential rains in the province, fairy tales, detective fiction— seem present mostly for their external attractiveness, mere adornments that remain largely untapped. Likewise, there is much unrealized potential in the three main characters, as the use of different narrative perspectives dilutes the force of each personality. Readers may feel that the last-minute surprise of Adelaida's notebook represents a novel that well might have

been more engaging than this one. Thus, the hoped-for «contagion» fails to develop. *Contagio* does not achieve that tightly-knit reconstruction of a baffling tragedy, highly dependent upon change, full of cruel ironies and suggesting major enigmas and doubts about the recapturing of events in writing, which we find in Garcia Márquez's *Crónica de una muerte anunciada,* a work to which del Amo's has numerous similarities.

Nevertheless, there are strengths: the portrayal of orphans making their way and of how strong affection, or the loss of it, can be ruinous in later life; well-told family sagas; the adept use of Adelina's perspective to convey her idyll with her brother, the latter's to portray the revolutionary plot as a fairy tale, and especially Manuel's to tell his own life (which, like Adelina's notebook, could have yielded an entire novel). All aspects of Manuel's lonely, desperate bachelorhood, conveyed in a fine impressionistic flow, strongly recall Unamuno's Augusto Pérez *(Niebla)* and the decadent novel in general. They give a deeper meaning to the notion of fate, chance, and (in)opportune timing, as do the use of abrupt time shifts and the pattern of moments or periods of bliss being dashed by great anguish. Recurring images of fragmentation seem to symbolize not only personal traits or circumstances but, more broadly, man's helplessness against fate, his futile attempts to sort out his memories and his destiny. And probably also the writer's project of fashioning from so many fragments of human experience a unified text, this text —a promising if not fully successful one.

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Luis García Montero. *Las flores del frío.* Madrid, Hiperión, 1991, 78 pp.

Más madurez y, quizás, más frialdad trasuntan estos temas de García Montero en relación a sus libros anteriores. Este complicado manejo de una expresión lírica simple a la vez que original se nota sobre todo en relación a *El jardín extranjero / Poemas de Tristia* (1989, pero que reúne poemas que datan de entre los años 1979 y 1982). *Diario cómplice* (1987) sigue siendo su obra más sustancial y novedosa. *Las flores del frío* destaca, sin em-